



**PRESENTS**

**DON'T  
TELL ME  
I CAN'T FLY**

**ART EXHIBIT AND COLLABORATION WITH THE  
NASHVILLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE**

**ARTIST DELLA WELLS**

**JANUARY 22 - MARCH 1, 2013  
AT THE METRO ARTS COMMISSION  
800 2ND AVE S., FOURTH FLOOR, NASHVILLE, TN 37210**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Gallery and Exhibit Introduction.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Artist Biography / What is Outsider Art/Folk Art?.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Exhibit Catalog.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Gallery Activities:</i>	
<i>Scavenger Hunt.....</i>	<i>5-8</i>
<i>Found-Object Self Portrait Collage.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Family Tapestry Project.....</i>	<i>9</i>

Gallery Manager: Rebecca Berrios

The information and activities in this guide were compiled and created by Susan Bay. Graphic Design by Lucas Littlejohn.

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**DELLA WELLS**  
***DON'T TELL ME I CAN'T FLY***  
**JANUARY 22 - MARCH 1, 2013**

Mission: The Metropolitan Nashville Arts Commission is a department of the Metro Nashville Government. The Arts Commission stimulates and advances the arts to enrich the human experience for the community.

*Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* showcases the work of Milwaukee collage artist, Della Wells. This exhibit is in conjunction with the Nashville Children's Theatre's production of an original play of the same title by Y York. The play, inspired by the life and art of Wells, runs from January 24-February 10 and is a wonderful companion to this exhibit.

The exhibit includes selected works from Wells' career and offers a unique sampling of her collage, ink on paper, and pastel works. Known also as a master storyteller, Wells often writes folktales to accompany her collages. After being asked what she hopes people take away when they view her work, she answers, "All of my work tells a story. I know what the story is for me, but I encourage people to fill in their own story." Metro Arts hopes viewers imagine their own stories for Wells' pieces.

When giving her own brief biography, Wells comments, "I did me", as a way of explaining that she invented folktales to create her own realities. What began as a childhood pastime became, through her art, a complex study of the way stories are used to form reality. "Art is a way to explore your identity. We use stories to create realities about what we think is true," said Della Wells.

To engage more with the themes of storytelling, identity, and reality in Wells' work please see the accompanying activity guide which includes a scavenger hunt and crafts to complete at home. A copy of the guide is included here and loose-leaf copies are available at the entrance to the gallery.

Select pieces are for sale, and 100 percent of the proceeds will go directly to the artist. We appreciate your visit and encourage you to sign the guestbook and note your opinions about our gallery and this exhibit. Please contact a Metro Arts representative if you are interested in purchasing any of the works that are for sale.

Special thanks to The Nashville Children's Theatre for making this exhibition possible and to Susan Bay and Lucas Littlejohn for their contributions to this gallery guide.

Please also visit our web site, [www.artsnashville.org](http://www.artsnashville.org) to learn more about our Artist Registry, an illustrated catalog of over 300 local artists, an Arts Directory of local arts organizations, a public art site, listings of upcoming forums, Arts Alert! and Art Beat e-newsletters, press releases, plus valuable and well-researched links to other arts-related web sites.

Disclaimer: Where the views or recommendations of third parties are given, these do not necessarily reflect the views of Metro Arts.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Della Wells describes herself as a self-taught folk artist and a storyteller, but did not begin her professional career as an artist until the age of 42. While she is a lifelong artist and sold her first work at the age of thirteen, it took time for Della to truly see herself as an artist. A Milwaukee native, she attended Milwaukee Area Technical College in the hopes of becoming a psychologist. At the urging of friends and a college advisor she began to seriously pursue art. This combination of storyteller and folk artist are vital to understanding Wells' art. Her creative process is rooted in her personal experiences and elaborated through storytelling into a visual work. Wells' work has been exhibited throughout the United States and is included in more than 100 private and corporate collections. Ranging from collage to pastels, from drawings to quilting, Wells has told countless stories through her works. When asked what art is, she responds, "Art is many things, I think we tend to think that it's just paintings and sculptures, but art is everything. Art is this floor, a stop light. Art is man's desire to create. Art is also, to find you... What people are going to learn about us is through our art. It's not just what the art world dictates. Art is how we live our lives."



"Della Wells" / Photo by Sonji Hunt

Photo and quotations from "An Interview with Della Wells" by Mikeda Cannon (<http://www.abea-wisconsin.org/della-wells.html>)

### What does it mean to be a self-taught artist?

Self-taught artists produce what is called outsider art, a term coined by art historian Roger Cardinal in his 1972 book entitled, *Outsider Art*. At its simplest, the term refers to art produced by artists outside of the conventional art world. Outsider artists have not studied art in the traditional format of school or apprenticeship, so their skills and techniques are self-taught. Outsider art is connected to an earlier term, art brut, a mid-20th century phrase used to describe art produced by psychiatric patients. The idea of art produced in isolation from the stereotypes of traditional art implies a purer, more internal artistic process, and it is this idea that outsider art takes from art brut. Sometimes called visionary art, the American Visionary Art Museum defines it as, "art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself." This idea of inner vision is crucial in understanding this type of art, for it is this inner vision that serves as the only boundaries for visionary art. Since outsider artists do not adhere to any set of rules set forth by artistic tradition, visionary art is spontaneous, individualistic, and highly unique.

### What is folk art?

Folk art is art from a specific and identifiable tradition. It is often an artistic tradition that is passed from generation to generation, or is learned from a community's artistic heritage. Folk art is usually connected to four main themes: utility, community, individuality, and symbolism. It is often decorative, or a part of everyday life, such as a quilt, it expresses community values while retaining individual artistry, and folk artists often employ symbolism in their expression. Many folk artists are also self-taught artists, and so what is the difference between folk art and outsider or visionary art? Many times the two ideas overlap—a self-taught artist can create folk art and a self-taught artist can create outsider or visionary art. Frequently the methods and materials of folk art and outsider art are the same, but according to the American Visionary Art Museum, "The essential difference between the two...is that visionary artists don't listen to anyone else's traditions. They invent their own."

## EXHIBIT CATALOG

*Alice Was Not Meant to Wear  
the American Dream, Nor Was I*  
Collage with Found-Object  
30" x 48"  
2009  
\$6,000

*Between*  
Ink on Paper  
17" x 13"  
2011  
\$300

*Freedom's Garden*  
Collage on Canvas  
14" x 14"  
2012  
\$400

*Girlfriend Night*  
Collage  
40" x 22"  
2008  
\$1,400

*Mattie Mae Tea Cup March*  
Collage  
14" x 14"  
2012  
\$400

*Hello Miss Mary (or Watch As  
My Magic Starts)*  
Collage with Found-Object  
14" x 22"  
2007  
\$500

*I Stood By the Side of the Road*  
Ink on Paper  
32" x 26"  
2012  
\$800

*In This Garden, My Dream*  
Blooms  
Collage on Canvas Board  
26" x 22"  
2012  
\$800

*Mambo Feet*  
Collage  
21" x 17"  
2006  
NFS

*Quilt Carnival*  
Collage on Masonite  
22" x 28"  
2011  
\$1,200

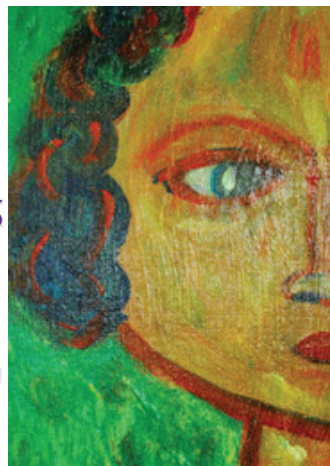
*The Watchers*  
Pastel  
31.5" x 38"  
1997  
NFS

*The World of Princess D*  
Acrylic, Mixed Media on Canvas  
16" x 20"  
2012  
\$800

"Wait" from *Little Colored Girl*  
Series  
Ink on Paper  
20" x 17"  
2002  
\$300

*We Too Ride to Glory*  
Collage on Masonite  
22" x 18"  
2008  
\$700

GO SEE THE NASHVILLE CHILDREN'S THEATER PRODUCTION OF  
*DON'T TELL ME I CAN'T FLY*, A PLAY INSPIRED BY THE LIFE AND ART OF DELLA WELLS



BUY TICKETS ONLINE AT [WWW.NASHVILLECHILDRENTHEATER.ORG](http://WWW.NASHVILLECHILDRENTHEATER.ORG) OR CALL 615-252-4675



## GALLERY ACTIVITIES

### Scavenger Hunt

Use this scavenger hunt to understand Della's art even better! Remember while you search, please do not touch any of the works.

1. Della Wells uses many repeated images in her works such as American flags or chickens. How many American flags can you find in this exhibit? How many chickens can you find?

American Flags: \_\_\_\_\_

Chickens: \_\_\_\_\_



“Wait” from *Little Colored Girl Series*

2. Artists often use more than one medium to create art. What does medium mean in art? Medium refers to what the artist uses to create his or her artwork. Sometimes artists use paints or pens, some artists use stone for sculptures, but really anything can be a medium in art! Della uses magazine clippings, toys, jewelry, found objects, and all kinds of things! When an artist uses more than one medium we say their work is multimedia, because media is the plural of medium. In this exhibit Della uses ink, paint, and many different media. Name one work from this exhibit for each type of medium:

Ink: \_\_\_\_\_

Paint: \_\_\_\_\_

Collage: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Sometimes Della uses everyday objects as part of her collages. Find the big piece in the center of the exhibit with a dress on it titled *Alice Was Not Meant to Wear the American Dream, Nor Was I*. Can you find 4 objects on the collage that you might see around your house or at school?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_



*Alice Was Not Meant to Wear the  
American Dream, Nor Was I*

4. Della often takes everyday objects and gives them a new use or purpose in her artwork. Tonia does the same thing in *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* with streamers, feathers, and the chicken bones. How could the objects you listed above be used as art?



*Hello Miss Mary (or Watch  
as My Magic Starts)*

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Della Wells' works sometimes tell stories that are true about her or people she knows, but sometimes the stories have made up characters. Find the work titled *Mattie Mae Tea Cup March* (it has a girl standing in a tea cup at the center). Can you make up a story about Mattie Mae and her tea cup march?

*Mattie Mae Tea  
Cup March*



Questions to help get you started: Where is she going? Is she by herself? Why is she in a teacup?

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6. Art can be used to tell stories about your friends, your family, or yourself. In the box below, draw your own story about an important time or event in your life.



7. Della's art is very detailed and unique. She likes to use paint, she likes to draw, and she likes to make art out of objects that many people would not think of as important. What did you like about Della's artwork? What did you not like?

8. Did you know that *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* was inspired by Della's artwork? What do you think inspired York to write *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* after seeing Della's artwork?

## Found-Object Self-Portrait Collage

Tonia faced many obstacles growing up. Her mom had a mental illness, her dad did not always understand her artwork, and Tonia struggles to find out who she is. One of the ways Tonia discovers her identity is through art. Tonia takes objects that she finds around her house and puts them on her science fair project to make it both science and art. When someone takes ordinary objects and makes them art, we call it found-object art. With a little creativity, found objects can become art, bringing new use to ordinary objects, and helping us see things from a different perspective.

Using Tonia's story and Della Wells' artwork as inspiration, create a collage self-portrait using found objects and magazines. Find 2-5 objects around your house, scissors, glue, some magazines or newspapers, and start collaging away! Remember that lots of things can be used as art—get creative! You may just find an amazing new use for an otherwise ordinary object.



(above) Alice Was  
Not Meant to  
Wear the American  
Dream, Nor  
Was I



(below) Mambo Feet

## Family Tapestry



*Hello Miss Mary (or Watch  
as My Magic Starts)*

A big part of *Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* is about Tonia and her family. Family is very important and lots of what we know about our family is from stories. We hear stories from our parents about great-grandparents or stories about our parents from our aunts and uncles. People have told stories to remember their family heritage for thousands of years. One way to tell these stories is through art!

In this activity you will have the chance to learn more about your family and more about how storytelling can be turned into art.

1. Gather your family stories:
  - a. Conduct interviews with family members. Ask them about important life events, people, and favorite memories.
  - b. Collect any artifacts or photos that might help in your creative process.
2. Choose one story or event from the interview that you feel is most important or interesting, and use it to write a complete short story.
  - a. Consider environment, characters, and actions.
3. Transform this written story into a Family Tapestry!
  - a. Think about how you might simply convey your story into an image that will help a viewer have a better understanding of your history.
  - b. Sketch out a design on paper.
  - c. Transform this sketch into a tapestry using paint, felt, fabric, markers, colored pencils, old toys, found objects — whatever you want to use!
  - d. Share your tapestry with your friends and family. When we make art it is important to share it with others like how Tonia shares her poster with Theo and her father. Don't be afraid to show off your work!